

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES OF ARGENTINA

MEMORANDUM

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Events that led to this situation

The events that led to such a serious measure of the Executive Power against Jehovah's Witnesses start in the month of June, 1976, in the province of Misiones in a small rural school where four children of Jehovah's Witnesses attend. On a national holiday reporters of a weekly magazine, interested in the precarious conditions of the school and especially because of its being near the Brazilian border where, as they wrote in their article, many people were entering the country illegally, visited the school to take pictures of it. To make their article even more effective, they placed some children with their backs to the flag while the others participated in the flag ceremony and took the pictures, below which they indicated that the children with their backs to the flag were Jehovah's Witnesses. (The children of the Witnesses did not attend school that day.)

That immediately started a wave of protests and aroused nationalistic sentiments. In August, 1976, in Apóstoles, Misiones, eight Witnesses were arrested and held in jail for 16 days. To obtain their release, court action was started. A direct quotation from the summary of the case states: "The present case begins in the police headquarters of Apóstoles, because of the refusal of several students and a teacher of the National Superior School 'Mariano Moreno' of that locality, followers of the cult of 'Jehovah's Witnesses', to sing the Argentine National Anthem and the San Martin's March, for which reason proceedings have been taken to arrest the parents of said students, a teacher, and two students, who are charged with the crime of 'slandering the country's emblems', Article 230 (Second) of the Penal Code."

The case rapidly gained fame and brought its consequences. In the provinces of Misiones, Entre Rios, and Formosa, many Kingdom Halls were closed down, which meant an open and manifest obstruction of freedom of worship by federal and provincial authorities. Immediately the Witnesses presented a special appeal before the Federal Courts of the Capital. It was answered by the Interior Ministry, accompanied by the decree of the Executive Power prohibiting all their public and private meetings, their preaching activities, the printing and distribution of booklets or magazines, and the closing down of their main offices. Again the Witnesses appealed, maintaining that not only was their freedom of worship hindered by government authorities, but also that their constitutional guarantees, listed in their reply, were being arbitrarily and unconstitutionally restricted and denied.

Meanwhile, for taking a firm stand for Jehovah's principles, more than 300 children of school age were denied a primary education because of being expelled from the schools which they attended or they simply were not permitted to register in them. Some continued their studies privately at home with the intention of taking the examinations at the end of the school year before special examiners so that

they could save the year's study, but this too was denied them. Why? One reason could be the note of March 2, 1977, sent by the General Council of Education to the Director of School No. 6 of Aristóbulo del Valle, Misiones, which concluded saying: "It is made known that the examination is not authorized if the pupils profess the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses." A clear case of religious discrimination!

The fight of Jehovah's Witnesses to firmly establish the right to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience in Argentina has a long list of victims--men, women, and children, arrested and mistreated for simply being Jehovah's Witnesses or for studying the Bible with them. In many cases there was a true abuse of authority with insults, threats, and even blows, as the accompanying list shows.

At the present time, according to our knowledge, there are about 100 young Jehovah's Witnesses prisoners in the military prison at Magdalena, about 50 more in Campo Mayo, and about 50 more in the rest of the country, youths 18 years old. And this year more can be added to that number, since the class of 1979 has been called for service. These young men have been charged with insubordination and have received a sentence of two and a half to four years in prison. The military service lasts only one year, which many times ends in eight or nine months.

These young men receive this punishment for fulfilling the Christian commandment of not fighting or killing and for not wanting to violate their conscience trained in Bible principles.

All of these problems, children expelled from schools, persons fired from their jobs, homes searched, unjustified arrests, and confiscation of our literature, are due to the fact that the Government does not want to give us official recognition as a religion, even though that is what we are and nothing more, as the whole world knows.